



*76 The walls of Duivelskloof, Banhoek Mountains (This and next 3 photos: M. Scott)*

## Modern hard climbing in South Africa

Michael Scott

Hard climbing invites comparisons. Comparisons produce grading systems, and the perennial arguments that keep up a good thirst!

Well, so how does SA climbing compare with the rest of the world? SA climbers who roam abroad to sample the terrors of Yosemite, the Saussois or the Black Cliff are duly impressed, and occasionally repulsed, but usually manage to acquit themselves creditably and the same seems to hold good for visitors here.

In 1963 Rusty Baillie wrote that the hardest routes on Table Mountain compared favourably with the best climbs overseas. A few years later that was no longer anywhere near the mark due to the rapid increase in standards in the U.K. This did not detract from the quality of climbing in SA, but did serve to accentuate the whirlwind achievements of visitors like the Barley brothers, who at one stage had the pioneering of the hardest climbs in the Krantzberg (Transvaal) and Table Mountain to their credit, viz. Armageddon and Roulette.

John Fantini from Australia, a recent tourist, commented that Monteseel (between Durban and the Drakensberg) was perhaps one of the best crags that he had climbed on world-wide. Robin Barley from Canada and his brother Tony from England, were also climbing here again during this year. They found that some of the bright young stars were starting to push grades that would keep us in the heats. SA also suffers from the usual grading anomalies resulting from personal preference, such as 'Last Three Inches' on Table Mountain, which was opened at 'G2', but would only be '5b' in Britain according to Tony Barley. True, the bottom pitches of this climb became easier after they were gardened out, but the crux had

always been clean. However, Magnetic Wall at 'G1' was upgraded to 'G2' by recent 'foreign' ascents and not because grips have fallen off either. To put my neck on a block, the following table of comparisons is offered.

RSA	USA	UK	Aus	France	Europe
D		DIFF		F } PD }	I
E		V. DIFF		AD	II
F <sub>1</sub>	5.5/5.6	SEVERE	12/13	D } TD }	III
F <sub>2</sub>	5.7/5.8	VS	14/15	TD }	IV
F <sub>3</sub>	5.8/5.9	{HVS	15/16/17	ED }	V
G <sub>1</sub>	5.9	{HVS	18/19	ED }	VI
G <sub>2</sub>	5.10	XS }	20/21	ED }	VII
G <sub>3</sub>	5.10	XS }	22/23	ED }	
H <sub>1</sub>	5.11	XS }	24		
H <sub>2</sub>	5.12				

The introduction of the 'H1' grade this year followed rapidly on the general acceptance that 'G3' really existed at last, an admission that has been staved off ever since the problematic and fingery direct start to 'Dive Bomb' in the Transvaal's Magaliesberg was being practised in the early 1960's. It was considered the only 'G3' even though protection was always available from a sling first placed high in a tree standing next to the cliff.

However, the push for new grades was even more remarkable when one considers the relative paucity of climbers. Our crag populace hardly sustains the one single Rock magazine, and odd climbing shop, all of whom would starve if they catered only for climbers. By and large we have a safety valve here on intense competition existing in the form of continually discovered entire new crags and climbing areas. With all this potential room to manoeuvre there is possibly less incentive to squeeze up at a desperate grade.

Recent finds have been Greg Moseley's Magageni cliff on the Wilge River in the Transvaal, and the red cliff on the Cedarberg Wolfberg, which was scoured by André Schoon and Robin Barleys' parties for over 20 routes (most of them 'G') in the space of a few months in 1979. If this sounds more like a pop than an explosion, bear in mind the 250km drive there and occasional epics of flooding rivers, which kept Robin Barley and Richard Smithers trapped for 2 days with their families, until the local farmer could swim across, tied to a rope, to bring them food. One cannot talk about hard climbing and pushing the grades without considering the competitive element. Acknowledged or not amongst SA climbers, it still will not go away. Although the occasional inspired whizz kid like Dave Davies can shyly go around opening 'G3' on everything he touches, most of the hard lads fare better in packs. Proponents of this concept are Tony Dick and Dave Cheesmond, who encouraged the development of climbers like Ed February, Chris Lomax, Keith Appolis and Brian Gross by personally demonstrating incredible push and optimism on rock. The schoolboy phenomenon in climbing has been taught to expect instant acclaim for performance. The classical approach to climbing in SA provides none of this as it is considered unsafe, so Dick engineered a means of providing it using the A.C.G. concept.

Tony and Dave used one bivouac and some aid when they opened 'Dinosaur

Revival' with Butch de Bruin and Duncan McLachlan on the massive rotten-looking, blank wall in Duiwel's Kloof. They ended up doing free pendulums in the dark from horrifying positions to make up some time. The second ascent, by Lacey, Lomax and Gross was done in a short day and all free climbing too! In the Transvaal in recent years, most development has tended to centre around the activities of old hand, Eckhard Haber and his team, with the performance of the young adepts like **Charles Edelstein**, still exploratory rather than demonstrative.

The annual N-S migrations of climbers (due to the different rainfall seasons) has done much to spread the clean climbing dogma, but has not managed to erase the Cape 'G' vs Transvaal 'G' gap. Cape 'G's' rely on strength and nerve, while those in the Transvaal require technique and balance.

No one has shown interest in using chalk as yet, perhaps because no climb justifies it, but perhaps also because hot sweaty fingers are something cragsmen quickly accept here in the temperature and humidity. In any event, friction pitches on sandstone are rare as the rock shatters into vertical blocks with horizontal cracks. Slabs are unknown except on the low altitude granite boulders near the sea coast. Bolts are a different story though. They have been used as safety anchors for many years, the most well known being Bob Davies's bolt on 'Swift Crag,' placed in 1961 to provide the then only possible belay for the crux. Modern climbers claim that bomb proof micro-nuts can be placed just off to one side nowadays. Next most loved bolt must be the one placed on **'Oscillation'** on the steep S Face of the Cedarberg Spout. The first pitch of this route had baffled a strong attempt by **Keith Fletcher** and even the iron(mongery) man, Don Hartley, had not been able to get in more than a tied-off blade in a shallow dead crack. With Keith tied to this, Don had stood on his shoulders, but still failed to break through. Recruiting Paul Fatti, always a strong resource, and Michael Scott with his arsenal of bolts, the team attacked. Don finally placed a badly skewed bolt in a shallow hole, which was used to pull up on and eventually stood on as well. It has been used by all subsequent parties and even the remarkable effort by Cheesmond and Cross in top-roping the moves free, was qualified by their declaration that the bolt was needed to lead the pitch.

Prize for the most controversial bolt goes to that placed by Scott, Graafland and McKirdy on **'Boltergeist,'** Table Mountain. A blank 5m bulge with only one crumbling wrinkle for a bat-hook invited a broken back on the ledge below. Scott tried, failed, then top-roped with Gareth Young. He later returned to place the bolt from above on the justification that it was a trick problem pitch, and the bolt was not for direct aid, but protection only. The pitch became known as the Married Man's bolt pitch and first lead on sight soon fell to Greg Lacey and Brian Gross, who then chopped the bolt amidst much heated cursing. 'That's what hooking is all about', said Lacey when asked if he thought the lead was justifiable. Bat-hooks have certainly helped to bolster failing nerves amongst both young and old stagers, and blank rock has opened magically to the caress of a hook, unfortunately sometimes on occasions where its use has not been mentioned subsequently. Whether these oversights are merely latter day examples of rock men's nonchalance, or due to some other personal failing, is difficult to say. The cut-off point seems to be that **'resting' does not deserve mentioning, but 'direct use' probably is.**

There is no doubt that merely carrying a hook has made it safer to push the standards and personal efforts on unknown ground, whereas climbing helmets are not nearly as safe and useful an aid and have lately been discarded on grounds of



77 Table mountain, with Cape Town



78 An overhang on Table Mountain

heat, clumsiness and price. Or is it hankering after 'safe danger'?

Prior to opening some of the harder eliminates on Table Mountain, there was a period of intense activity on the old mechanical climbs. 'Captain Hook' breaks its way spectacularly through huge roofs between 'Roulette' and 'Myrrh,' and had relied on large wedges in a poor rounded rail. Lomax, Lacey and Gross jammed with great strength and tenacity, and practised until the pitch could be led with one rest. An on-sight lead would be 'H', they felt.

Gross then attacked the classical 20m long aid traverse on 'Myrrh'. This went easily to a broken corner, where after a rest on aid, berserk moves on meagre holds took him through a poor break in the roof above. His comment that Rusty Baillie had made a route-finding error in continuing along the traverse line, should be taken as pertinent only to the strongest of arms and nerves. Subsequently both Dick and Barley have elected to follow the iron fence post pegs rather than broach the roof. In 1979 Lomax achieved the first dramatic solo of 'Roulette', showing that strong arms and nerves were still fairly plentiful. When Dave Cheesmond's party climbed 'Buccaneer' on Nursery Buttress, an outcrop which overlooks the Kirsten-



bosch Botanical Gardens, it quickly became a 'must bag' among the regulars working out on the dressed-stone block bridge below Rhodes Zoo. Several climbers psyched out on the awkward 'G2' suspended traverse through the top ceiling, which comes hard on top of difficult 'G' climbing below, but a number of quick repeats were also achieved.

Postern Buttress has concentrated the greatest number of hard routes, and when Rick Williams and Tony Chinery put through 'Hot Dogger' at 'G2', it was already in illustrious company. Don Hartley and Leon Kaimowitz had helped with the fun of making and placing a most monstrous wedge to protect the crux after cam-nuts had proved too small. Everyone promptly scrambled to knock the 'G2' grade on pitches opened by two 40 year-old climbers, and returned with respect. When Dave Davies fell off after trying to free the aid move before the big wedge, respect increased still further. To boost Postern's prestige even further, Rich Smithers and Mike Roberts stared at a photo of the buttress and decided there was room for 'Natal Fever'. Hard pitches of bold climbing lead up to a trick roof at 'G3', which requires berserk finger-jams while hanging bat-like, then a reach around the lip for poor holds and a free wheeling momentum mantleshef move to get up. While Rick Williams, Tony Chinery, André Schoon and Pete du Preez were cleaning up long complete new lines on Grootkop Buttress, overlooking the Atlantic coastline cluttered with the huge stranded tanker Antipolis, the other hard packs were wringing out the blank remnants on Africa and Fountain Ledge, beneath the cable station on the summit of Table Mountain. Davies and Cheesmond wound 'Farewell to Arms' around 'Touch and Go' and 'Cableway Crag,' but could not find a top pitch. The crux at 'G3' and aid move is considered very, very thin. 'Cabbage Fingers' by Gross and McLachlan relies on plenty of muscular jams and laybacks, and at 'G3' and usually wet, it is small wonder it has not had a second ascent yet.

Smithers and Barley cleaned up 'Oddshouters Outing' and 'Tin Can Alley', with 'Oddshouters' being an eminently fine 'G2' route, using the side of the nose of Africa Crag. It did however take young Andrew Forsyth to chop the only aid point from the bold hanging layback pull-up through the top roof. Barley and Scott fared better than Lacy with a loose block, and completed 'Hard Times' with 2 points of aid. A subsequent lead by Roberts took the pitch 'free' by using the first peg to clip into the second one for a runner. A hot dispute arose contesting that this could not be called free climbing even though Roberts descended from the sling to the same spot, then led across a blank 'G2' wall in fine style and not in fact using the pegs for any aid-assisted moves or even as a rest point. Davies, Lacey and Kelfkins climbed 'The Dream,' 'G2', fingery and exposed, with the crux on such fragile finger flakes that the lightest person in the party was picked to lead. Dave Kelfkins really came to light with the absolute plum route: 'Tour de Force'. With its 2 'H1' pitches it poses the most formidable undertaking, although the route, known formerly as 'Super Roof', was top-roped, climbed mechanically, practised and finally subjected to the most amazing flying circus when 5 leaders took 11 peels in succession, before the crux was finally led from below.

Dion Tromp and Aleck McKirdys' parties have been responsible for some good second ascents and new climbs of short and powerful nature, whilst Ed February and Keith Appolis engineered a wall of mild horror up the Spring Buttress Amphitheatre overlooking Woody Ravine. In reply to accusations of chipping holds they retorted that they had been throwing off all the loose rock, and there seemed to be plenty of it. An aid move integral to unravelling the bottom sections

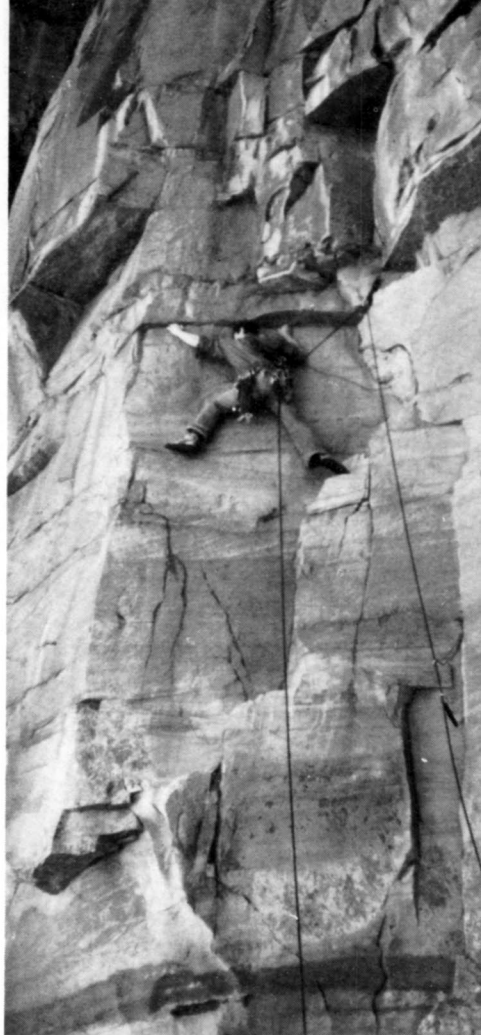


79 *The big roofs on Africa Ledge*

was found possible only on 'Friends' cam-nuts. Keith and Ed had sat watching the cliff from the buttress opposite for some time, and had calculated that where they saw pigeons landing, there must be handrails. This knowledge led them across a long and treacherous rounded 'G1' hand-traverse, but did not prepare them for the 'G3' recess at the end. Keith admitted afterwards that it was fear of falling with the only runner already 10m below, that got him up the pitch on nigh non-existent holds.



80 Climbing in Du Toits Kloof  
(Photo: A. Barley)



81 Wolfberg Cracks, Cedarberg Mountains  
(Photo: M. Scott)

Talking about falling, it is a subject that seems to get as much practice as climbing does these days. There appears to be undue carelessness amongst the young tigers who are regularly popping off clutching loose blocks or slippery toes, while the old hands carry on unaffected by those problems. When Gunter Zeppel fell off the top of 'Jacob's Ladder' on Table Mountain, the 11mm rope jammed in a cleft and cut, leaving him to plummet 80m on to the path and miraculously collecting only a broken femur in the process. Dave Davies removed a loose block and himself from 'Firecrackers' on the Witteberg, taking a long tumble, which shook him rather. His partner was Greg Lacey, who was also holding the rope on another occasion when Brian Gross lobbed inexplicably from the intricate crux on 'Renaissance' on Du Toits Peak. In both cases the parties were able to get themselves out of the harrowing positions resulting, and off the cliff, although not without difficulty. Ed February's attempt to free the aid pitch of 'Leadbelly' on Elsie's Peak, was a bit optimistic, and when he unzipped his runners during the fall,

his coccyx suffered greatly in the landing. Probably the greatest presence of mind was displayed by Mike Roberts, who abseiled a new line at Monteseel, then top-roped it. He came away with a huge block and found he was not stopping, which was quite true, because at the impact the belayer found he was not tied on and let go everything to prevent himself going over the edge. Mike noticed the abseil rope still hanging in position while he was falling past, and grabbed it in mid air, stopping himself and thus saving all but the skin on his hands.

Seldom have so many 'G' pitches been opened so intensively as on the Cedarberg Wolfberg's dramatic crags. So sensational is the climbing that a major oil company featured a full colour picture of a climber on the most prominent mechanical roof. 'Celestial Journey' has 7 'G' pitches and one 'F3' and aid, and takes walls so blank you at first think you are expected to hold on to the lichen, while 'Alone in Space' has a mind-blowing exposed traverse ending right over nothing for miles below. Leading up to this wall is a vicious curving crack with a razor flake poised dramatically. Standing on this, it is possible, and only just possible, to jam around the roof. The rock is so polished, it hardly provides any friction at all. Dave Davies used aid for this with Robin Barley, but Mike Roberts did a repeat with Rich Smithers, and he managed to lead it free.

'Apollo' on Castle rocks has become such a trade route that in common with other long country climbs, time is no longer any problem. All the early ascents took 10–12hrs and used around 10 points of aid, but it gets done in 4–5hrs now, and with sometimes only 1 or 2 points of aid. The same climbers have been known to do the route 3 or 4 times in one season, and thus have learnt the terrain so well, that at least one completely free ascent has been claimed.

The **Yellowwood Amphitheatre** repulsed attempts by strong parties over a period of 10 years, until Tony Dick and Dave Cheesmond found a cunning line through. The key was an involved traverse several pitches long, which provides most of the excitement. Tony Dick's ace still remains 'Renaissance'. This impressive route on Du Toit's Peak of 400m of 'G2' and 'M4' defeated Tim Dunsby and Ray Mardon from Britain, as well as Michael Scott and Hans Graafland some years back. Recently Butch de Bruin, a Rhodesian granite climbing expert, commented that people unfamiliar with at least major portions of the route, would find it impossible to do in one day only. While this claim has been made often before, 'Renaissance' may well be the route to hold the title. Why do the old favourite walls in the Cape receive continued visits? Perhaps because the ranges here are so well known and scoured, whereas the Transvaal distracts attention to new areas off the beaten track all the time.

In the final analysis though, climbing in the RSA is enjoyable from as far north as Bloubergs 300m walls guarded by the eccentric legendary chieftan Malabocho, to as far S as Hangklip on the coast, pounded by the rough seas known to the early Portuguese navigators.

We do not have to climb in the rain, or cold weather, we do not have to queue up for the best routes. What we do have to do is to continue to encourage overseas visitors to come to our crags to sustain those enjoyable beer-quenched arguments!